Hollywood “Awakens” Its Curiosity

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There are dozens of neurological diseases plaguing the minds of both children and adults. Hollywood is beginning to depict the epic consequences that these diseases can have on both the individuals afflicted with the disease and people around them. These movies raise public interest and awareness in matters of science, medicine, and psychology. It is not so much that they raise awareness, which causes a great push for new advancements, but rather that they portray such diseases, which enlighten viewers on the devastating effects of various neurological diseases. While Awakenings focuses more on science, Away From Her focuses on the death of a relationship. If you are only planning on watching one of these movies, it is my suggestion that you view Awakenings because it will grab your attention on an emotional and intellectual level.

Fiona Anderson, an unemployed 48-year-old with Alzheimer’s disease, has her life altered when Dr. Sayer, played by Robin Williams, studies the effects of some type of encephalitis lethargica, which is similar to an extreme case of Parkinson’s disease. Unlike Away From Her, this movie focuses on portraying the relationship between the doctor and patient through the portrayal of Dr. Sayer’s struggle with a new drug and his relationship with Robert De Niro’s character, Leonard. Both Away From Her and Awakenings attempt to educate their viewers on the devastating effects of various neurological diseases. However, Away From Her focuses on Fiona’s altering relationship with her husband, and the way that her relationship alters as her disease progresses. This movie progresses more slowly as compared to Awakenings and it is harder for the viewer to become interested in the movie. Away From Her focuses too much attention on Fiona’s husband and not enough on what is interesting: Fiona’s struggle with Alzheimer’s Disease. Awakenings does a much better job of explaining the science behind encephalitis lethargica. Someone who knows nothing about this neurological disease can leave this movie with a general understanding of how L-Dopa can be used as an artificial hormone to decrease the symptoms of this disease. More importantly, one can understand the effects of overmedication on our bodies. Dr. Sayer spends a great deal of time explaining the disease and the possibility of L-Dopa as a treatment, causing the viewer to not only learn about the disease, but also to feel what the patients are going through. By understanding the disease, viewers are able to actually place themselves in Dr. Sayer’s shoes and follow him through his journey. Also, unlike Away From Her, Awakenings is a very fast-paced scientific mystery and the viewer is constantly left anticipating the next event. Furthermore, one can anticipate what is to come for the patients after the movie ends. If given the choice, I would choose to watch Awakenings every time.

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*This author wrote the paper for FYIS 106: Medical Mysteries taught by Dr. Shubhik DebBurman.